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ABSTRACT

Every five years the Speech Communication Association supports a nationwide survey of the basic course in speech at institutions of higher education in the United States. The surveys seek to reflect the current conditions of the course in terms of instructional practices, staffing, administration, and course content. While these surveys are of some value, they could be much more helpful with revision in data gathering and reporting methods. At present the survey does not assure geographic, economic, or enrollment representation. Further, there appears to be no effort to balance the proportion of church, state, and privately supported institutions. The 1980 report, for example, does not report data for particular types of institutions nor is it comparable to previous studies. The instrument has a public speaking orientation, especially as it seeks identification of the type of topics and activities that characterize the course. Attention to data gathering and detailed reporting are two necessary steps in improving the 1985 report so it may provide a more precise reflection of national tendencies (tendencies for particular types of institutions) and lay the groundwork for future comparisons. (HOD)

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THE BASIC COURSE SURVEY:

A REQUEST FOR MORE

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Roughly every five years S.C.A. supports a nationwide survey of the basic course in speech at institutions of higher education in the United States.[1] The surveys seek to reflect the current condition of the course in terms of "instructional practices, staffing, administration, and course content."[2] Such information should assuage the anxiety of basic course directors by telling them how near they are to the academic mainstream. It should also provide some data which may be helpful in justifying or fending off change in the nature of the course as they direct it. Unfortunately, while the studies conducted thus far may prove of some value toward those ends, they could be much more helpful with revision in data gathering and reporting methods. The current report also makes unjustified claims in attempting to demonstrate shifts in staffing patterns and the importance of performance. In addition, particular questions arise concerning the sample, questionnaire and reporting which cast doubt on the validity of the survey and thus its accuracy in reflecting the condition of the basic course. This report examines those questions in calling for an improved 1985 survey.

SAMPLE

As in previous years, the 1980[3] sample was not chosen through any random selection procedure. Surveys were mailed to every institution on the S.C.A. mailing list of community colleges, colleges and universities in the United States.[4] While this procedure is no doubt prompted by a laudable desire to produce a true representation of the available population, it does not appear to accomplish that end. Indeed, while each survey discusses the question of representation briefly, no justification for accuracy is ever attempted on the basis of proportional representation. Both the 1974 and 1980 reports clearly delineate the proportion of two year-, four year-, and graduate-degree granting

institutions reporting, but neither compares this data to representation on the S.C.A. mailing list or to national relative proportions. As a result the reader does not know if the 1980 mix of 27% community college, 35% college, and 38% university is an accurate representation of the relative frequency of these institutions in higher education.[5] More important, no apparent effort is made to assure geographic, economic, or enrollment representation. There appears to be no effort to balance the proportion of church-, state-, and privately-supported institutions, so long as some of each respond to the questionnaire. Certainly, attention to such matters would grant the reports greater credibility and applicability. A smaller, but proportional, sample would also ease the expense and effort involved in gathering data, as fewer surveys would be printed, distributed, and tabulated. In addition, a smaller sample would allow more direct follow up to clarify unusable and solicit unreturned questionnaires.

The sample reporting in the 1980 study casts considerable doubt on the results, especially insofar as they may be interpreted to indicate any nation-wide trends in the basic course. While nearly identical numbers of schools responded to both the 1974 (554) and 1980 (552) surveys, the nature of the responding institutions differed significantly, as reported in Table 1.[6]

TABLE 1
Demographic Data for Reporting Institutions*

	Nature of School				Support	
Date	Community College	College	University	State	Private	Church
1974	8%	54%	38%	49%	23%	27%
1980	27%	35%	38%	67%	21%	12%

*Data not published in 1970 report.

The sample is simply not the same. It becomes difficult if not impossible to identify a trend when comparing data drawn from essentially dissimilar samples. Again, the answer appears to be to select a sample which is representative of

the frequency which characterizes the national population. At least then changes in relative proportion will represent similar shifts in the makeup of higher education nationally. At present, these shifts appear somewhat capricious.

QUESTIONNAIRE

As both the 1974 and 1980 reports indicate, continual effort is made to improve the questionnaire. Additions, deletions, and alterations are characteristic changes which should improve the instrument. These efforts are to be lauded. There are, however, four changes which call into question the reported trends cited in the 1980 report.

The first change is in the selection of course orientations. Of the five choices offered in 1970 and 1974, only one (public speaking) was available in 1980, though "combination" appears synonymous with "multiple" as a reported orientation. Necessarily, some change must be made by an institution previously reporting one of the three emphases dropped. While the new choices may suggest more obvious definition, they are not explicitly defined in the report. Most important, this shift in basic categories tends to negate any effort at comparison of courses pursuing any emphasis other than public speaking or combination. If new categories were to be introduced, they should have been added to previous choices, if only to test the assumption they are more likely to represent what is happening in the basic course.

A second problem emerges from what may at first appear to be a minor change in jargon. Both the 1974 and 1980 reports present tables reporting the frequency and relative importance of performance in the courses. In 1974, however, the type of performance tabulated is the speech. The 1980 survey uses the broader term "performance" without further delineation. Schools may now include conversation, group discussion, interview and any of a number of other

related phenomena in their responses. The result is that any effort at comparison of 1974 and 1980 data becomes questionable, as the units being compared may be at least somewhat dissimilar.

The 1980 report attempts to resolve this problem by identifying the type of performance activities used. Unfortunately, identification is attempted through analysis of responses to a twenty-item list of topics and activities.[7] No fewer than fourteen (70%) of the items on the list may be interpreted as public speaking terms. "Interpersonal Communication" is a single item, with no options beyond that broad response. Similarly "Group Discussion" is the only small group concept included. Respondents to this item may have substituted the questionnaire's terms for their own (e.g. selecting "Speech Anxiety" to represent a discussion of communication apprehension in the small group or interpersonal reticence or shyness). They have no opportunity--and possibly no incentive--to report such topics as perception, self concept, self disclosure, group norms, group roles or nonverbal communication specifically. The list, then, functions as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would suggest: it limits the survey's ability to report reality. As the available options are limited, so are the results.

Finally, the questionnaire has also changed in the area of allowable response. The 1974 and 1980 reports seek to identify the type of faculty teaching the course. In 1974 "several schools reported faculty members of more than one rank" were responsible for "the bulk of the teaching in the basic course."[8] The result was data which could not be interpreted, but only reported. The data offered no measure of the level of faculty status held by those responsible for teaching the course. The 1980 study asked for identification of "responsibility" for "instructional time,"[9] with apparently only one option possible per institution. Thus, the 1980 study claims to report

accurately the status of faculty responsible for the course. In addition, by 1980 the 1974 data had somehow become interpretable, and the 1980 study claims a shift to lower level faculty teaching the course. As the percentages in Table 2 indicate, this finding may be somewhat suspect.

TABLE 2*
Status of Instructors

	Status				
Date	Graduate Assistant	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Professor
1974	17	40	54	33	21
1980	13	"nearly half"		14	10

*Data not published in 1970 study in this form.
**No specific figure published.

In each case the figures reported for associate and full professor account for just under 28% of the total numbers reported.[10] In any event, there appears to be little case for a shift to lower status faculty teaching the course, especially when the marked increase in community college participation in the 1980 survey is considered.

Changes in the questionnaire and in the nature of the type of response deemed appropriate represent a worthwhile attempt to enhance the survey instrument. Many of the changes made appear to result in data which is more clear and which should allow reasonable comparison over time. Unfortunately, comparisons at this time appear premature. Indeed, additional revision--especially of the activities/topics chart--appears to be desirable. As with course orientation, these revisions should take the form of additional response items rather than replacements for current options.

REPORTING

The reader's ability to interpret data should be enhanced by the manner in which that data is reported. Unfortunately, though the 1980 report repeatedly claims to demonstrate shifts in the nature of the course, little comparison

with 1970 or 1974 results is represented in tabular form. No doubt this is a result of the shift in emphasis and speech/performance categories mentioned earlier. Comparison is also limited by the changing nature of the sample. None of this results in any apparent hesitation to draw comparisons in the text of the report, however.

The initial comparison is drawn in course orientation. The 1980 report claims a shift to a public speaking emphasis. Several factors which may mitigate that belief have already been discussed including the nature of the sample, a shift in response options, and imprecision of previous options. Schools previously opting for "communication," "fundamentals," or "voice and diction" which may offer courses similar to those they reported in 1974 now must choose a different title to describe their courses. Some of the apparent "shift" no doubt results from such choosing. Some may also result from the changing sample. Reporting the proportion of community colleges, colleges, and universities in each of the five possible orientations would represent a worthwhile first step toward resolving dispute about the "shift." Ultimately, however, the comparison would be most valid were it to compare data reported from a single sample over a period of time. Such data would provide a much more appropriate basis for comparison.

The second major comparison in the 1980 report claims a shift toward an increased emphasis on performance. Assuming data gathered for two 1980 orientations, "public speaking" and "combination," may be compared with the 1974 report data for "public speaking" and "multiple" (and ignoring differences in the samples), such data hardly supports any shift toward this increased emphasis. Table 3 reports the number of speeches/performances required in 1974 as compared with 1980.

TABLE 3*
Number of Speeches (1974)/Performances (1980)**

Orientation	None	1-3	4-6	7-10	10+***
Public Speaking	2.5/0	6.8/6.2	60.2/67.9	28.8/23.0	na/2.9
Mult./Comb.	0.5/0.9	22.9/15.0	52.3/54.9	22.5/22.5	na/6.6

*Data not available from 1970 report.
**The table reflects the 1980 change in phenomena reported.
***Category not reported in 1974.

Rather than a major trend, the table appears to reflect at most a modest redistribution. Such redistribution may be as readily accredited to the changing nature of the sample and the phenomena reported as to any change in the nature of the course.

Table 4 may be argued to show a trend away from performance and toward theory as reflected in the ratio of class time devoted to each. As above, Table 4 compares data reported in 1974 and 1980 for the two similar orientations.

TABLE 4*
Theory/Performance Ratio (1974/1980)

Orientation	20/80	30/70	40/60	50/50	60/40>
Public Speaking	31.4/23.7	30.5/35.8	21.2/19.7	15.3/14.6	1.7/6.2
Mult./Comb.	24.8/8.0	29.8/26.5	21.1/33.5	18.8/18.6	5.0/12.6

*Data not available from 1970 report.

If comparisons may be drawn between the dissimilar 1974 and 1980 samples, such comparisons do not appear to support a trend away from theory and toward performance as reflected in the proportion of class time devoted to each. Again the results may reflect sample change more than change in the course.

The reporting methods employed in both the 1974 and 1980 surveys limit basic course directors' abilities to apply data to their institutions. There is no attempted analysis of data by type of school. The 1970 study reported figures for community college, university, private, state, and church institutions.[11] Such reporting would presumably allow course directors to

build stronger cases for applying data to their schools. Thus, by charting existing reported data somewhat more elaborately the surveys could move closer toward their announced purpose: providing information of value to those involved in the basic course.

Reporting methods used in 1974 and 1980 tend to both cast doubt on the conclusions of the reports and reduce their utility for specific institutions. Modest changes in charting the data would allow course directors to make more direct application. The problem with comparison might most effectively be resolved by moving to a different gathering technique.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic course surveys continue to improve over time. If the 1980 sample represents the nation, and there is no evidence provided to support this assertion, the 1980 report represents an overall picture of the basic speech course in higher education. It provides clear data concerning the status of faculty teaching the course as well as some measure of the frequency of performance required, in addition to a wealth of data concerning exemption, requirement, autonomy, text usage, and funding.

The 1980 report however, is not particularly useful for course directors. It does not report data for particular types of institutions nor is it comparable to previous studies. The instrument is weighted toward the public speaking orientation, particularly as it seeks identification of the type of topics and activities which characterize the course. Most important, there is no apparent concern to assure the sample from which data is drawn is representative. It is this last omission which most seriously undermines any attempt to compare data across time or to accept data as representative.

The ongoing study of the basic course in speech is a worthy concern, certainly appropriate to the discipline and deserving S.C.A. support. Attention to data gathering and detailed reporting are two necessary steps in improving the 1985 report so it may provide a more precise reflection of national tendencies, tendencies for particular types of institutions, and lay the groundwork for future comparisons.

NOTES

[1]James W. Gibson, Charles R. Gruner, William D. Brooks, and Charles R. Petrie, Jr., "The First Course in Speech: A Survey of U.S. Colleges and Universities," Speech Teacher, 19 (January 1970), 13-20; James W. Gibson, John A. Kline, and Charles R. Gruner, "A Re-examination of the First Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities," Speech Teacher, 23 (September 1974), 206-214; James W. Gibson, Charles R. Gruner, Michael S. Hanna, Mary-Jeanette Smyth, and Michael T. Hayes, "The Basic Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities: III," Communication Education, 29 (January 1980), 1-9.

[2]Gibson, 1980, p. 1.

[3]For clarity references to dates of surveys will be the year of publication rather than the actual year of the survey.

[4]Gibson, 1980, p. 2.

[5]Gibson, 1980, p. 2. These figures actually appear fairly close to the distribution of student population, but are not remotely close to the frequency of each type of institution as reported by the annual Digest of Educational Statistics.

[6]Data reported in this and all subsequent tables is drawn from the survey reports themselves, as indicated in each table.

[7]See Gibson, 1980, p. 3 for the list.

[8]Gibson, 1974, p. 211.

[9]Gibson, 1980, p. 5.

[10]This obviously questionable manipulation uses 50 for "nearly half."

[11]Interestingly, the 1970 report did not chart cumulative data. The 1974 and 1980 reports rectified that oversight.